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“Enjoyable”, “okay” or “rather pointless”? An exploration of Chinese and British students' views on innovative and traditional assignment types in UK universities

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“Enjoyable”, “okay”, or “rather pointless”?



The Open University

An exploration of Chinese and British students' views on innovative and traditional assignment types in UK universities

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Outline



- Research Questions
- Chinese and British students' views on writing:
Data from student questionnaires
- 'Innovative' assignment types:
Data from tutor interviews
- Students' views of innovative assignments

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Research Questions



1. How do Chinese and British students plan and write assignments?
2. What are their views towards assignments?
3. How does each group cope with innovative assignments?

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Student questionnaire data 1



- Online survey (SurveyMonkey)
- Data collected in 2007-8
- Participants from previous research project (BAWE), contacts, Facebook, CSSAs,...
- 202 responses from Chinese and British students
- Wide range of disciplines
- Undergraduates years 1,2,3 & postgraduates
- Over 40 UK universities represented
- Follow-on questions on assignment types

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Student questionnaire data 2

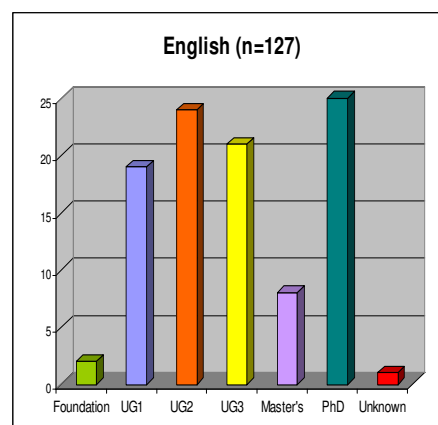
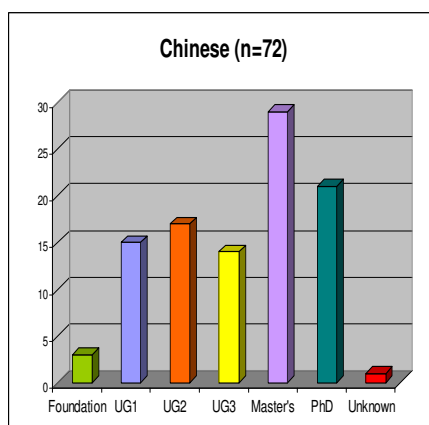


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- Chichester
- Coventry
- Cranfield
- Edinburgh
- Essex
- Hull
- Imperial
- Keele
- King's College
- Lancaster
- Leeds
- Leeds Met
- Liverpool
- London Met
- Loughborough
- LSE
- Manchester
- Nottingham
- Open
- Oxford
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- Reading
- Royal Holloway
- Sheffield
- SOAS
- Swansea
- Teesside
- UCL
- Warwick
- Westminster
- York

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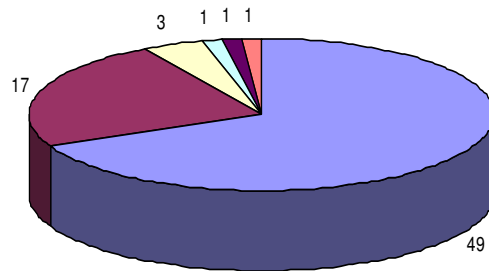
Student questionnaire data 3

Year Groups (as %)



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What is your first language?

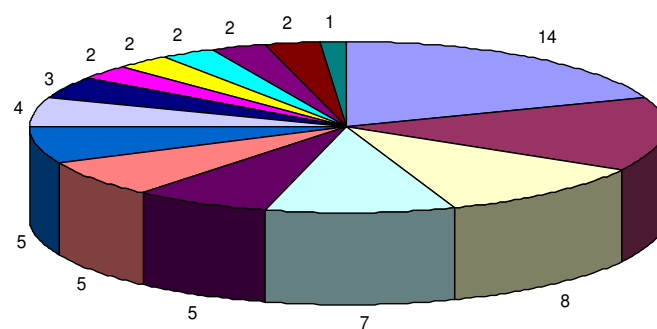


Raw figures

- Mandarin / Putonghua
- Cantonese / Yue
- Wu / Shanghainese
- Gan
- Hakka
- Minnan / Hokkien-

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What is your home province and country?

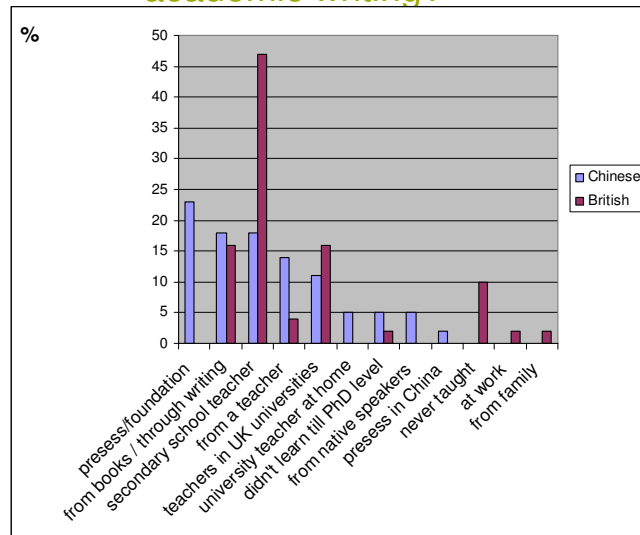


Raw figures

- Guangdong
- Other
- Beijing
- Shanghai
- Liaoning
- Zhejiang
- HONG KONG
- Jiangsu
- Hunan
- Jilin
- Shandong
- Shanxi
- TAIWAN
- Tianjin
- MALAYSIA

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Students' views on writing: Q1: Where and how were you taught about academic writing?



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Q1: Quotes from British Students



Secondary School

- Probably secondary school, but I think i pretty much just picked it up as I went along.
- When doing 'A' level English the teacher said something about listing a few points and making them into paragraphs but that was all. I've always been very bad essay writer and it's contributed to the spectacular failure of my academic career.
- I have never been taught about essay writing at GCSE I did very little and I deliberately chose A levels that didn't involve essays (Art and geography).
- never taught apart from some **hints and tips** at university

Trial and Error

- Wasn't really taught; learned by imitation
- i have never been taught how to write academically, I'm slowly learning during the Master's course, learning through the mistakes I make.
- Half-day workshop offered for PhD students
- At uni I had one seminar in the first year but apart from that I have learnt through reading study skills books and trial and error, I still don't even know if I am doing it right but as I have passed so far I guess its ok.

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Q1: Quotes from Chinese students



IELTS

- At High School, I learnt academic writing for IELTS text. i don't think I've been taught about academic writing till I came to UK
- I was never seriously taught about academic writing. The teacher in foundation course only gave me the tips in writing in IELTS.

Practice

- Most of it is by reading, and loads of practice i guess.
- Follow textbook guidance, self-practice, through trials and errors and reading examples of academic writings.

PhD

- Academic writing in English you mean? I think for me I only learn it after I started my PhD study, from reading papers and getting corrections from my supervisor.

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Students' views on writing: Q2: How do you plan and write your assignments at university?



Chinese students

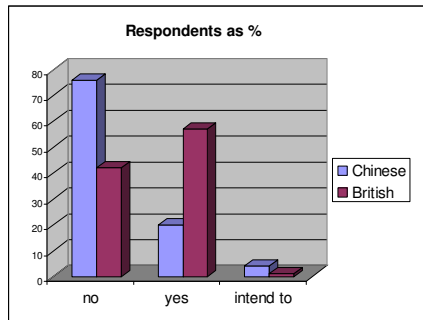
- Most write straight to a computer – but not all
- “yes, i write them on computer straight away, but I make changes afterwards.”
- “a draft plan in my brain and straight on to the computer.”
- “make a plan do some research write a draft”

British students

- All but one mentioned planning of some kind.
- Most plan on paper first
- “Plans, drafts, suffering, more plans, more drafts, and submission.”
- “I write out plans by hand using various techniques since it makes better use of my time”

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Students' views on writing: Q3: Have you changed this way of planning and writing your assignments?



Chinese

- no, just a habit.
- I had been used to write in Chinese firstly and then translate it. But afterward I switch to writing and planning at the same time.
- "Sometimes I think in Chinese... I know it's not good but it's inevitable".
- Still I am not good at planning things. I would start straight ahead.
- Yes, more systematic

British

- No, I use the same method I learnt at school and it still works for me!
- Not really. I'd like to plan more, perhaps but time simply isn't there.
- Yes, I spend more time planning and checking through or re-drafting.
- Yes - I plan them before I write. Also, I've absorbed some of the 'style' appropriate to the discipline.
- i've developed it since starting uni, before did it all by hand

Students' views on writing: Q4: Which of the following have you ever used to help you with your assignment-writing?



Students' views on writing:

Q5: Generally, how do you feel about assignment writing at the moment? - Chinese students



Accomplishment

- After I finish it, I have a sense of accomplishment.
- I like assignment writing, I prefer it to exams.
- It's useful but hard
- challenging, yet enjoyable
- yes. I change from abomination to custom.

Improving

- writing assignments is challenging but rewarding... I enjoy it because I can see my improvement.
- Before I came to study here. I was not good at writing. Now I seem to enjoy it. It is a good way to manifest my English skill.
- At begining, it's tough as the way is very different from what I was required in my homecountry.

Don't enjoy it

- I do not enjoy it because I always have to rush to meet the deadline.
- I don't enjoy it. but it improve my English as well.
- Nervous
- It should have been much more useful if there had been an assignment clinic.
- I don't really like it... maybe it's because I'm so bad at writing, so I don't write often and don't want to show it to others.
- it's really difficult. I always worry about my grammar and my expression.

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Q5: Generally, how do you feel about assignment writing at the moment? – British students



"sense of satisfaction"

- useful and enjoyable
- I really like writing assignments because you feel a sense of satisfaction... especially if you get a good mark
- Enjoy it, learn a lot. But i stress about deadlines.
- helpful for thinking things through.
- I like writing but just procrastinate
- Love it. I've always enjoyed writing. I find it useful for consolidating my thoughts.
- i enjoy essay writing over other forms of assessments, eg exams, posters

"painful" "pointless"

- I find writing painful, stressful, like drawing teeth... I don't think it gets easier - but more and more difficult.
- It is useful to organise my thoughts but it is time consuming and boring to do
- Much of it rather pointless

Changing attitude

- I've become more confident about my writing.
- I now understand that the difficulties of writing remain even when you're experienced - it's just that you accept them as part of the process.
- It's OK once I've really got into it but I struggle to get started and am finder this harder and harder
- Writing is always a challenge for me; when it's going well, time passes while I am unaware. When I am struggling, it is the hardest task in the world.
- Im suprised how little help we get with writing our assignments at university, espically considering the fact that we had a whole module in a semester on how to use a PC.

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Data from tutor interviews 1



- Part of the British Academic Written English project
- **58** semi-structured interviews
- **20** disciplines
- **3** universities: Warwick, Reading, Oxford Brookes

Example Questions:

1. What role does assignment-writing play in your department?
2. What's the purpose of assignment-writing rather than exams?
3. What types of written assignment do you set?

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Data from tutor interviews 2 :The Essay



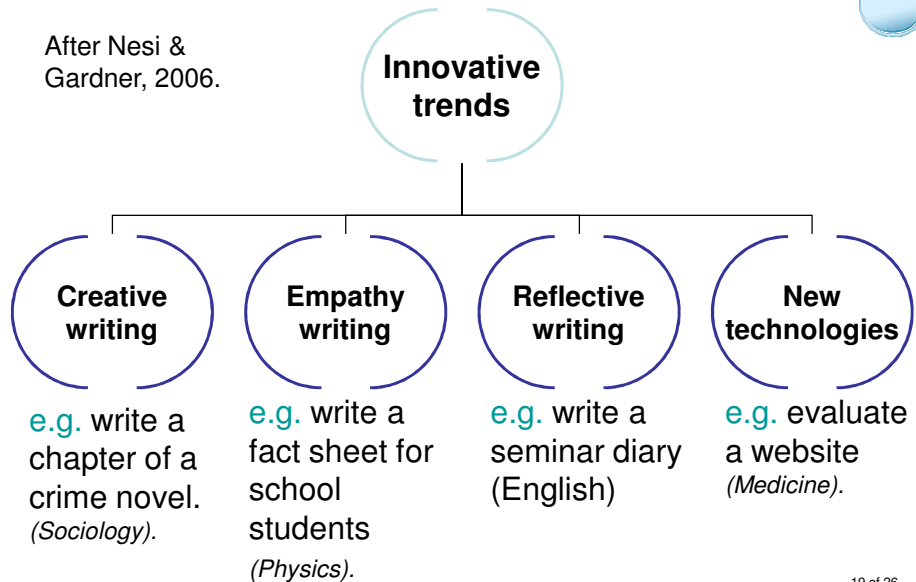
- The essay is the '*default genre*' (Andrews, 2003:117)
- 19 /20 disciplines include 'essays'
- 'we're quite a traditional department' (*Sociology*).
- 'I think we could experiment more' (*History*).
- 'It has been the convention to use essays. I would like to break away from that.' (*Psychology*).
- Essays don't encourage students to do 'more interesting' pieces of work. (*Computing*).
- 'we've tried to move slightly away from standardised assessment and towards more innovative forms'. (*English*).

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Data from tutor interviews 3: Innovation

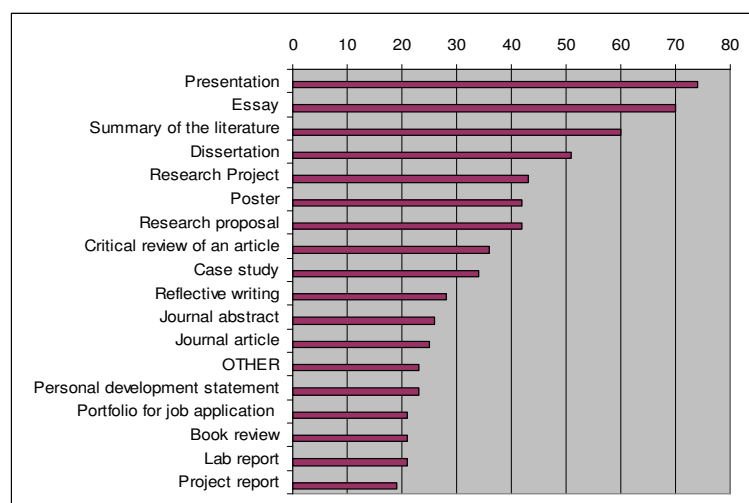


After Nesi & Gardner, 2006.



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Back to - Students' views on writing: Types of assignments done in current course



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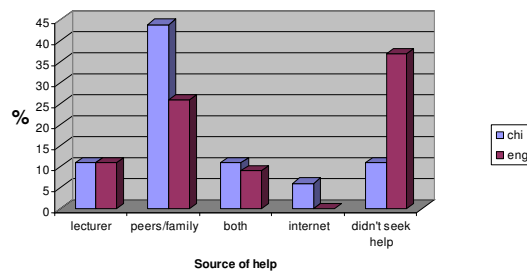
“Other” types ticked



- Persuasive writing
- Problem sheets
- Website evaluation/development
- Marketing proposal / Business plan
- Case notes
- Field Study
- Business or other letter
- Group reflective essay
- Narrative fiction
- Crossword / Quiz
- Creative writing
- Technical writing

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Who did you ask for help?



- Both groups encountered many new assignment types on their current course.
- Chinese students more likely to seek help.
- Chinese students more likely to ask peers than tutor.

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Students' views on writing: Misunderstanding the assignment



Chinese students

- I always find that it is hard to argue critically in my assignment, especially in business field assignments.
- about where should i focus on.
- only due to ***** wording of question which were ambiguous

British students

- did not understand the level of detail necessary.
- wrong angle and not interpreting the question correctly
- not correctly answered in a critical way
- too vague or not offering enough supporting evidence
- I have sometimes not done what I was supposed to do, but I was conscious of this and willing to take the hit of being marked down accordingly to do work which I wanted to do

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Some points on innovative assignments



- Students in UK universities are required to understand a wide range of text types and more text-specific help would be beneficial (*Hewings and Hewings, 2001*).
- Chinese universities have more traditional assignments and more written exams => students are less used to innovative assignment types (*Nield, 2004, Cross & Hitchcock, 2007*).
- Tutors could help more, eg they could:
 1. pilot new assignments
 2. have class discussions of the rubric
 3. provide model answers
 4. enlist help of peers / previous cohorts

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RQs Revisited



1. How do Chinese and British students plan and write assignments?
2. What are their views towards assignments?
3. How does each group cope with innovative assignments?

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